
The First of the Signs of Jesus

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John 2:1-11

According to the Gospel of John (John 2:1-11), Jesus performed the first of his miracles at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. It was called the first of his "signs," where he revealed his glory.

But listen closely this morning because I want to start this sermon by referring to a different gospel than the one we have just heard. In the middle of the Gospel of John, some of the disciples of Jesus ask Jesus a hard question. These disciples see a man blind from birth. They ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned? Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:1-2)

I reckon it was the sort of question Jesus received often. Every religious figure is asked such a question when tragedy, or suffering, or death occurs. Who is to blame? Who sinned? Where can we register our complaint? But Jesus, as he often did, refused to be constrained to a false choice. "Neither this man, nor his parents, sinned," Jesus said; "rather, he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." (John 9:3)

In another gospel (Luke), Jesus makes a similar point. Apparently, in Jesus' time, a tragic accident had occurred. The Tower of Siloam had fallen and killed eighteen people. Jesus asked his disciples, "Do you really think these eighteen people were any worse sinners than anyone else?" (Luke 13:4). Of course not.

Still, his disciples, when they encountered tragedy and suffering, would ask the question, "Who sinned? Who is to blame?" These were recurring questions for Jesus, and they are recurring questions for us. Some people have asked similar questions this past week. A powerful and tragic earthquake has struck Haiti, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere.

While many people have been about responding with prayer and money and aid, others have begun to ask the same old human questions, "Who was at fault? Was it the Haitians, or their fathers? Was it this generation of citizens or a former generation of leaders?"

What would the media do without poor old Pat Robertson, who seems to be always available during a tragedy to testify to the clumsy and weaker minds of humanity. One of his responses, as you might have heard, was to blame. He actually said that this week's earthquake was one of several consequences of a pact that Haitians made with the devil during their revolution from slavery. The absurdity of this claim defies any logical response. But, suffice it to say, Pat Robertson not only got his theology wrong, he got history wrong, too (the successful Haitian revolution and resistance occurred against Napoleon Bonaparte, not Napoleon III).

Pat Robertson, unfortunately, has become a caricature. His comments have become so buffoonish that it is easy to see through his weak intellect.

But what about Danny Glover? I actually like Danny Glover and his acting. But he, too, said some rather silly things

following the Haiti earthquake. His comments were more trendy, so they did not get reported as widely as did Robertson's.

It seems that Danny Glover blamed the Haiti earthquake on climate change. Now, I actually believe that the earth's climate is changing, and I actually believe that some of that change has occurred because of the irresponsibility and ill stewardship of humanity. But I do not believe the Haiti earthquake resulted from what we failed to do at Copenhagen a month ago, a connection that Danny Glover did try to make.

Again, his response is like that of so many of us, whether we are conservative or liberal. We try to place blame. We ask, "Who sinned?" Be careful ridiculing Pat Robertson so much that you do not realize what Danny Glover said. Be careful ridiculing anyone else so much that we do not realize what we ourselves are doing!

In fact, the Haiti earthquake occurred because earthquakes always occur. The great earthquake of Lisbon, Portugal, in 1755, also produced theological response and blame (do you know Voltaire's *Candide*?). The earthquake of San Francisco in 1906 did the same.

We human beings are destined to construct buildings on earthquake faults, and earthquakes will always occur. I agree with the columnist David Brooks, who noted this week that in 1989 a 7.0 earthquake occurred in San Francisco and 63 people died. Last week, a 7.0 earthquake occurred in Haiti, and it is estimated right now that perhaps 100,000 people have died.

Brooks pointed out that the tragedy in Haiti is not an earthquake issue. It is a systemic poverty issue. Will we continue to provide the same shallow relief that simply makes us feel useful? The same shallow relief that simply assuages our guilt for a season? Or can we actually inspire people and countries to build infrastructure and plan for the long term? San Francisco and Lisbon learned from earthquakes.

We are beginning to hear some miraculous stories from the Haiti earthquake. Friends and family members have used their hands to dig out survivors from the rubble. Missionaries have vowed to return to the poor. Airplanes and doctors and supplies and food are flying in.

But, remember this about miracles. The true miracles of the world happen over time. They do not happen instantly, or without preparation and hard work. The world remembered Captain Sully Sullenberger this past week, he who landed his crippled airplane right on the Hudson River, without losing a single one of the 155 people aboard. That happened a year ago this past week. That emergency landing did not happen randomly, as if by luck. That captain had spent hours, years, a lifetime, flying airplanes. He was prepared.

The miracles of life take preparation, and they occur over time. The signs of God's presence in the world take preparation.

Where was I? Didn't I start this sermon by talking about signs?

Yes, the gospel for today is one of my favorites, the story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding, when all the regular wine had run out. What a great party guest Jesus turns out to be!

Many scholars argue that the first part of the Gospel of John is structured around signs, or miracles - maybe seven of them. Jesus miraculously turns water into wine (the first of his miracles), he heals an official's son and then a lame man. The feeding of the multitude is his fourth sign, and then there's the healing of the man born blind, the man about whom the disciples asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" According to the structure of the gospel, this would be the sixth of Jesus' miracles.

But the Gospel of John does not call them miracles. The Gospel calls them "signs." In the bible, a miracle is really anything that points to God. A miracle is anything that is a sign of the grace and love and power of God.

Jesus came into the world to be a sign of God, to point to God, to give evidence of the power and love of God. The Gospel of John organizes itself around these signs, and the first one - the very first one - occurs at a wedding.

I believe that Jesus shows up in tragedy and crisis. In the cries of pain and loss in Haiti this week, Jesus has been there. Jesus has been present with the caregivers and diggers and helpers in such tragedy. Jesus has been present with those who mourn. Jesus will be present at miraculous recoveries and with the healing power of doctors and nurses. The signs of the presence of God are those wonderful men and women who have showed up to help. The signs of the presence of God will

not be among those who are blaming; the signs of the presence of God will be among those who are responding - responding with love and care and wisdom.

Yes, Jesus is present in tragedy, and Jesus will always be present in tragedy. But Jesus likes to be present at weddings, at times of rejoicing and merriment. Jesus shows signs of glory everywhere, healing the sick, assisting the poor. But, according to Saint John, Jesus performed his first sign, his first miracle, at a wedding.

So, friends, never be afraid to celebrate. Never be afraid to offer joy. Never be afraid to give thanks, just as you have heard this past week the voices of those Haitian citizens who were actually singing hymns to God in the middle of the night, following the earthquake. Singing hymns.

Never be afraid to celebrate. Never be afraid to offer joy. Never be embarrassed or sheepish to turn water into wine. According to Saint John, it was at a wedding, at a time of celebration, when the wine had run out, that was the first place in which Jesus revealed his glory.

AMEN.

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